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Reagan's Bid to Resume Military Aid to Contras Is Likely to Turn on a Few GOP Representatives

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WASHINGTON—When the last White House bugle has sounded, President Reagan's campaign to resume military aid to Nicaraguan insurgents will be won or lost as much in his own Republican ranks as in the Democratic opposition in Congress.

For all of the partisan rhetoric, the outcome is likely to turn on fewer than two dozen GOP members in the House who have consistently been critical to the administration's ability to sell its policy. Without their support, the president failed in his bid last spring to provide arms to the guerrillas. Weeks later, he won a compromise bill to provide logistical and medical supplies only after substantially consolidating his GOP base.

The political breakdown of the House dictates this strategy. The 253-182 Democratic majority poses a major handicap for the Reagan administration, but the president has long had sufficient Democratic votes to win military aid, barring GOP defections. Forty Democrats supported Mr. Reagan's initial bid for aid to Nicaraguan rebels last April, but he lost 40 Republicans. By June, after offering his successful compromise, he was able to win a series of votes with Republican defections reduced to no more than seven.

Republican Solidarity

"We can't afford many losses," says Rep. Dick Cheney (R., Wyo.), a Reagan supporter. By their own shorthand formula for measuring the GOP defections needed to kill the aid package, opponents recognize the same history. "Fifteen Republicans clearly put us over," says lobbyist David Cohen, who opposes aid.

Going into next week's House vote, the struggle for Republican support is a miniature of the larger debate. The White House attacks and a major televised speech the president has scheduled for Sunday night are aimed as much at the GOP as the Democrats, and GOP conservatives would transform the contest into a test of party loyalty and identity under Mr. Reagan. The weakened state of the guerrillas contributes to a sense of urgency, and the "no compromise" strategy is a call to the trenches, a time less for consensus than to win.

The \$100 million package the president is seeking for the Contras now reflects an escalating war and escalating U.S. involvement. The total is more than double what the Central Intelligence Agency was spending on an annual basis when aid was first

cut off in 1984, and the \$70 million of the package that is for covert military assistance will buy surface-to-air missiles, such as the British Blowpipe, to help counter the Soviet Mi-24 helicopters used by the Sandinista forces, according to intelligence sources.

GOP's Old-Line Base

Among Republicans, the unease with the president's request is greatest in the party's old-line base in the Northeast and Midwest. However small in number, these opponents represent a real division over the administration's policy, and that split appears in the Senate, too.

Sen. Nancy Kassebaum, who delivered a strongly worded rebuttal last week, is the daughter of Alf Landon, the GOP presi-

Three Important Leaders

Philip Habib's new role as special envoy to Central America is aimed at allaying this concern, but ultimately the Nicaragua debate is being shaped by personalities in Congress. Among Republican ranks, three leaders are most important. Rep. Joseph McDade of Pennsylvania was a major architect of last June's successful vote. Minority Leader Robert Michel, in backing the president, saw the issue then as an opportunity to blunt criticism from young conservatives on his right. Mr. McDade is a bit wary, though still supportive of the new request. But Mr. Michel has made the fight a major test for himself, even evoking the Biblical image of Daniel in the lion's den.

"'Bob, dare to be a Daniel,'" says the Illinois Republican, remembering his father's advice as a boy. "Dare to stand your ground." It is a public display unusual for the affable, easygoing leader, and Mr. Michel's intensity poses difficulties for Reagan's GOP opponents. Many of them are his traditional allies, but they resent the new moral exhortations about their duty to support the guerrillas. "How do you knock helicopters out of the sky, with popguns?" says Mr. Michel. He concedes that neither side has a monopoly on morality, but he has cast the debate in moral terms. "Those who support the Sandinista regime or are unwilling to do anything effective to pressure that regime to enter into reconciliation talks," he says in a recent letter to Republicans, "have a definition of morality so bizarre as to make us wonder precisely what they mean by the word."

Alongside the GOP leader, Mr. Cheney has emerged as a dominant force. A potential successor to Mr. Michel someday, the Wyoming Republican has a moderate image and more conservative agenda, particularly in areas of foreign policy. His appointment to the House Intelligence Committee gives him new influence, and as a former White House chief-of-staff, he reflects a willingness to suppress Congress's foreign-policy role in favor of the executive.

Significant Inroads

"There are a lot of Republicans who are against it now," says Mr. McDade, but the administration has already made significant inroads. Rep. Willis Gradison of Ohio and New Hampshire's Rep. Judd Gregg indicate they will support the package. Running in a Republican Senate primary in

Anatomy of a Turnaround

In April 1985, President Reagan lost a major House vote on aid to the Nicaraguan rebels. By June, through persuasion and compromise, he managed to win aid. Nearly all the Republicans who opposed Mr. Reagan in April supported him in June.

Votes against aid to the Contras	APRIL 23	JUNE 12
Republicans	40	7
Democrats	208	177

NOTE: The April vote concerned military aid. The June vote concerned logistical and medical supplies.

Source: Congressional Quarterly

dential nominee in 1936. Rep. Ralph Regula hails from Canton, Ohio, home of William McKinley.

"It wasn't me that changed, it was the administration that changed," says Sen. John Chafee, a New England patriarch and combat veteran of two wars who broke with the president when Mr. Reagan pursued a more open confrontation with the Nicaraguan government.

These traditional Republicans are joined by younger opponents who mix their GOP beliefs with the politics of working-class districts. Pennsylvania Rep. Thomas Ridge, a Vietnam infantry veteran from the grittier, industrial world of Erie, backed last year's compromise of nonlethal aid but remains disappointed by U.S. diplomatic initiatives since then. "I don't see it as a sign of weakness," Mr. Ridge says, "to enter into bilateral negotiations."

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